

Largest Corn-Crib in the World

By: Dale C. Maley
For: FairburyNews.Net
Date: March 27, 2023

Michael Lucas Sullivant was a very successful Ohio farmer. He sold his Ohio farmland and purchased 80,000 acres in Champaign and 40,000 acres in what is now Sibley, Illinois. He bought most of this land for \$1.50 per acre from the federal government. Michael also borrowed from East Coast banks to have enough money to improve the raw prairie lands.

He and his family moved to his 40,000-acre Burr Oaks farm in Ford County in 1867. M. L. Sullivant was 60 years old when he started to transform the virgin prairie at Burr Oaks into a productive corn farm. In 1868, he broke the prairie and planted 1,000 acres of corn. He converted another 5,000 acres of virgin land to cornfields the following year.

By 1870, the Burr Oak farm attracted national attention as the largest farm in the United States. Harper's Weekly magazine published a fascinating story explaining how farming was performed on the vast 40,000-acre farm in Central Illinois.

When the September 23, 1871, Harper's Weekly article was written, Mr. Sullivant grew 11,000 acres of corn at Burr Oak. The average yield at that time was 45 bushels to the acre. Besides the cornfields, Mr. Sullivant had 5,000 acres of other crops under cultivation.

The Harper's Weekly reporter struggled with how to give the magazine readers an idea of the vastness of green oceans of corn grown at Burr Oak. The reporter decided to calculate how big of a corn crib would be required to hold the harvest. He estimated it would take a continuous corn crib 12 feet wide, eight feet tall, and five miles long. This theoretical corn crib would hold 495,000 bushels of ear corn.

Unfortunately, during the eight years after the Harper's Weekly story was written, Mr. Sullivant would lose his entire 40,000-acre farm, become gravely ill, and die. When Burr Oak farm started to shut down, approximately 100 black men lost their jobs. Most of them moved to nearby Fairbury. After Mr. Sullivant's death, his widow often visited the wife of John J. Taylor in Fairbury. Mr. Taylor was a prominent Fairbury banker.

After Mr. Sullivant died in 1879, a public sale of all his property was held. Mr. Hiram Sibley, of Rochester, N.Y., was his largest creditor and, by this sale, became the possessor of 17,641 acres of Burr Oaks Farm. The Equitable Trust Company and others took the estate balance, comprising 14,000 acres. Mr. Sullivant died in January 1879.

In 1910, Fletcher Harper Sibley, grandson of Hiram Sibley, decided to build the largest corn crib in the world in Sibley. The vast, red, wooden, slat-sided structure was constructed on Ohio Street along Route 47. Harper Sibley paid \$20,073 to have the massive crib built. This cost would be equivalent to \$647,000 in today's dollars. The crib was 325 feet long, 35 feet high, and 72.5 feet wide. Mr. Charles G. Rohrer, manager of the Sibley Estate Farms for forty-five years, is credited with designing the crib.

Initially, the crib would hold all the corn grown on the Sibley Estate Farms. As corn yields increased, the crib could only fit half the total annual corn production. Further yield improvements resulted in the crib only being able to handle one-quarter of the annual corn production.

At first, farmers brought their grain to the crib using horses and wagons. In later years, tractors with wagons and trucks brought the grain to the crib. The corn crib complex could take in 15,000 to 17,000 bushels of corn daily.

A fifty-horse single-cylinder Fairbanks-Morse gasoline engine powered the complex. This power unit was housed in a separate brick building just west of the crib's center section. The single piston moved horizontally in the engine. Two heavy spoked flywheels maintained the momentum needed for steady power. Each flywheel was six feet in diameter and four inches thick.

The engine was started by putting a farmer's match in a special holder placed in position through a hole in the head of the engine. The flywheel was rotated until the piston was on the power stroke. Then by quickly hitting the match holder, ignition of the fuel and oxygen mixture caused the engine to fire with a sound like a cannon, and hopefully, once fired, the engine kept on running. The engine was cooled by water from a cistern filled from the crib's eaves spouts.

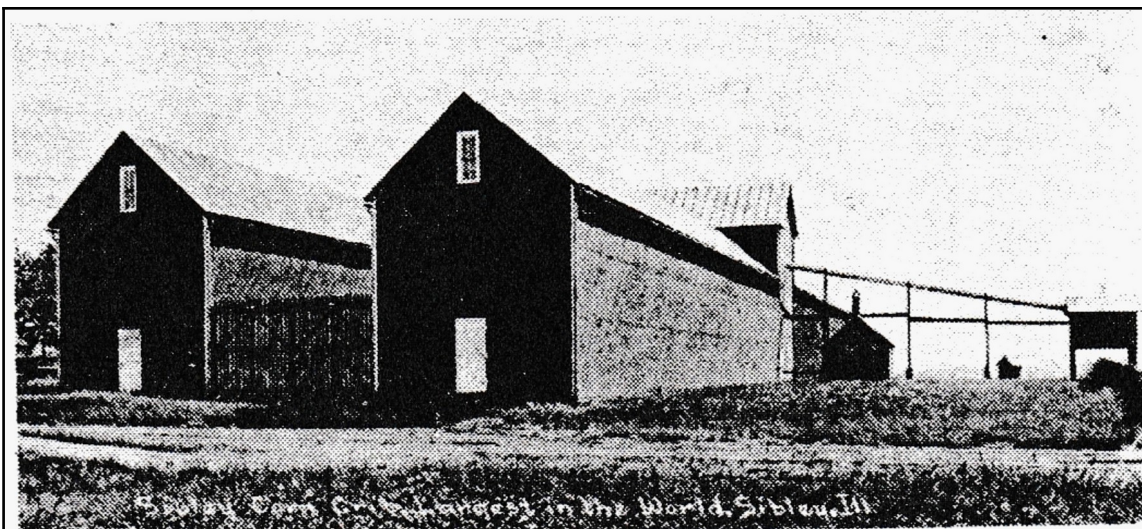
When it was time to shell the corn, eight men shelled it at a rate of 10,000 bushels a day. The corn cobs were initially burned. In later years, the cobs were used as bedding for livestock on the Sibley Estate Farms.

In May of 1944, during World War II, 90,000 bushels of corn stored in the Sibley crib were shelled and shipped to various wartime industries.

The massive corn crib was featured in Robert Ripley's "Believe it or Not" as the biggest corn crib in the world. 1962 was the last year the corn crib was filled. In 1963, the enormous crib was only one-quarter full.

In the Spring of 1965, after over 50 years of service, the massive corn crib was torn down. The 50-horsepower Fairbanks-Morse engine was donated to Centennial Park in Champaign in 1965.

For more than half a century, the small town of Sibley could boast that it had the largest corn crib in the world.



View from Ohio Street of the largest corn crib in the world at Sibley, Illinois.